

A Major Change in Direction for U.S. Iraq Policy Needed (October 19, 2006)

A New United States Policy on Iraq

U.S. Representative Rick Boucher

October 19, 2006

The war in Iraq has been badly mismanaged. The Administration's strategy for Iraq has been flawed from its inception. The President launched an invasion based on assumptions that we now know to be false. Virtually no planning was done for the aftermath of the war, and in his rush to invade Iraq the President failed to garner the international support necessary to achieve quickly a stabilized Iraqi government or to quell the insurgency we now face.

The President must now level with the American people about the true nature of the situation on the ground in Iraq. As the number of American casualties continues to climb and taxpayers are footing a bill that averages nearly \$2 billion per week, it is time to abandon the rosy scenarios and confront the situation that exists. A major change in direction is called for. Here are my recommendations:

Step one should be replacing Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld with a skilled individual who has the foresight and flexibility to lead the U.S. defense mission. Mr. Rumsfeld has failed, and he no longer has the confidence of the military commanders in Iraq, whose advice he has consistently rejected.

By the end of this year, there will be more than 300,000 Iraqis in arms who have been trained by United States forces. Obviously there is an uneven quality in the capabilities of these 300,000 troops; however, among that number there are troops who are capable of undertaking on their own portions of the security mission in Iraq. It is time for them to begin taking over in portions of the country where they are capable of providing security. As long as the Iraqi Central Government believes that the United States plans to stay in the country indefinitely, the Iraqis will not undertake responsibility for their own security. To do so carries for the central government certain costs and political risks which it would rather not shoulder.

The next step will be for United States to announce to Iraq that the time will come in the near future when American troops will be withdrawn on a phased basis as Iraqi military forces undertake the security mission. A clear schedule for this transition must be presented privately by senior American military commanders to the Iraqi Central Government with a clear statement that the schedule will be followed. Obviously, the schedule must be constructed in the full knowledge which American military commanders have of the capabilities which Iraqi forces currently possess. That schedule should detail the portions of the country where Iraqi forces are capable of assuming control and establish a time line for the assumption of that control, paired with the removal of American forces as the front line security providers as the Iraqis undertake those responsibilities.

A very small American force should remain in each area where the Iraqis are undertaking the security responsibility in order to offer consultation and advice at the highest military levels; however, the actual ground work should be from that time forward performed by Iraqis. A clear time limitation should also be stated with respect to the continued presence of the small force of high level personnel who will offer consultation advice in the regions where the Iraqis have assumed

primacy for their own security.

This schedule and time line should be quietly communicated to the Iraqi Government so as not to give notice to the insurgents and to embolden them with the knowledge that the size of the American force will be reduced.

Furthermore, we must communicate strongly to the Iraqi Government that the continued support of the United States is conditioned on a clear willingness and schedule for the Iraqi Government to disarm the Mahdi Army and other sectarian militias within the country. This will be a difficult step for the central government to take since Moqtada al-Sadr is a part of the coalition government, possessing within his party several key ministries, and maintaining control of the Mahdi Army. Nevertheless, this step must be taken if stability is to be restored because the Mahdi Army and similar sectarian militias on the Shia side are in significant part responsible for the growing civil conflict in Iraq which if unchecked will lead to a full-fledged civil war.

Finally, we must begin to treat the regional tensions and conflicts in the Middle East in their totality and understand that they are all to a greater or lesser degree interrelated. The United States must re-engage a broad-fronted international diplomatic effort to achieve stability in the larger Middle East. For example, we should sit down directly with the Iranians and negotiate an end to their nuclear program. I think this course is what the Iranians have been waiting for. They are talking to the European Union; however, they are not going to negotiate an end to their nuclear program until the United States assures Iran that we are not going to launch an invasion and in exchange receives assurance from the Iranians that on a verifiable basis their nuclear program will be stopped.

Resolution of the Iranian nuclear standoff will produce other benefits. If Iran is satisfied that it will not be invaded, it would have a greater incentive to cooperate with the United States by exerting its influence on the Shiite population in Iraq and encouraging among other things a standing down of sectarian militias like the Mahdi Army. That army is obtaining its financing from Iran at the present time, and a secession of that funding would constitute a major step forward in the effort to achieve stability in Iraq. An accord with Iran could also enhance the prospect for a cessation of funding by Iran of Hezbollah in Lebanon. If we are pursuing all of these approaches, the Europeans would be far more willing to provide a higher level of direct assistance in terms of financial support for rebuilding Iraq and possibly in terms of offering high level military contacts who could help the transition from an American only force in Iraq to a time when the Iraqis undertake their own security.

Achieving these new stabilities in the Middle East would also have a dramatically favorable effect on the world price of petroleum. It is generally assumed that the "political risk" component of the price of crude oil is at least \$20 per barrel. If a broad stability in the Middle East is achieved, we could probably expect to see the price of oil lessen to something in the \$40 range.

I am hopeful that the President will soon recognize the clear need to change the course he has refused to waiver from since the war's beginning. Taking the steps I have outlined is our best opportunity to achieve stability in this presently chaotic situation.